



A Truth Commission for Northern Ireland?

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Truth Commissions have become one of the most common ways for a country emerging from conflict or a record of severe human rights abuses to deal with the legacy of the past. While they can differ greatly in terms of their powers, purpose and structure, a truth commission is basically an official body set up to look at the pattern of past events and issues and report on its findings after a set period of time (Hayner, 2001). In the last three decades there have been over 40 such truth commissions held in various parts of the world with recent or ongoing initiatives in places as diverse as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Peru and Timor-Leste. The best known is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission held in the 1990s.

A debate on whether or not Northern Ireland should have a truth commission, or some other form of past-focused truth mechanism, has been taking place amongst policymakers, victims groups and human rights NGOs for many years (Lundy and McGovern, 2005). Political parties have

also expressed views that have tended to diverge along traditional lines. Generally speaking, the main nationalist parties (SDLP and Sinn Fein), the Alliance party and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) have been more in favour of the idea of a truth commission than unionists (UUP and DUP) and the fringe loyalist parties. In 2005 the British Government and a House of Commons Inquiry both argued that the time was not yet right for a truth recovery mechanism but did not rule out the possibility of such a process in the future.

While there have been some efforts to garner wider public opinion on the subject (Cairns and Mallett, 2003) it was not clear what people in Northern Ireland generally thought about the idea of a truth commission. In 2005 the findings of a series of questions asked as part of the 2004 **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey** on attitudes towards a truth commission for Northern Ireland were made available. This research update is based on the findings from that

survey. Of particular interest was whether there were any differences or similarities in the views of people identified by their party political or religious affiliation.

Is a Truth Commission Important?

For the purposes of the survey a truth commission was defined as 'an inquiry where everyone would have to tell the truth about things to do with the "troubles"'. When asked whether they thought a truth commission was important or very important for the future of Northern Ireland more people thought that it was important (50%) than not (28%) (Table 1). This was also true when the figures were broken down both by religious affiliation and support for the North's main political parties, though with some significant differences. Catholics were a little more likely to state that a truth commission was either important or very important for the future (58%) than those of no religion (55%) and more again than Protestants (44%), although even in the latter case this represented more people than those that thought it unimportant (33%).

In terms of political parties a majority of Alliance (59%) Sinn Fein (58%) and SDLP (57%) supporters expressed approval for a truth commission. This fell amongst UUP (44%) and DUP (42%) voters, although in each case again more stated a truth commission was important than not (34% and 37% respectively).

Opinion is therefore quite divided on the idea of a truth commission for Northern Ireland. There would appear to be a body of support for such an inquiry, though more so amongst nationalists than unionists and not constituting an overall majority. However, this also needs to be set against other responses. For example, while 'getting to the truth' was seen as the most important single aim for a truth commission, 84% felt that such a

Table 1: Is a truth commission important or unimportant for the future of Northern Ireland?

	%			
	All	Catholic	Protestant	No Religion
Very important	27	31	23	30
Fairly important	23	27	21	25
Neither	19	17	20	15
Fairly unimportant	15	14	17	14
Very unimportant	13	8	16	13
Don't know	3	3	3	3
	100	100	100	100

mechanism ‘would not necessarily get the truth’ and 81% felt there were more important things to spend money on. Indeed 65% also agreed that there were better ways to deal with the past than a truth commission.

There were some other differences in terms of religious and political affiliation. Generally, Catholics were somewhat more likely to feel that a truth commission could make a positive contribution, for example, in helping to ‘clear the air about the conflict’ (50%) than Protestants (35%). However, there was a significant degree of shared scepticism that a truth commission could give Northern Ireland a ‘clean start’ or make it a ‘more peaceful and less divided society’. It would appear therefore that a large number of people might like to find out the truth about the past, but they may not regard it as a key priority nor are they convinced that a truth commission is the best way of getting it. Perhaps surprisingly, given the public debate on truth recovery, only 23% of people had heard of a truth commission having taken place elsewhere. This may also mean that the description provided in the survey (as an inquiry ‘where people would have to tell the truth’) had a significant impact on people’s responses.

Aims, Hopes and Fears

If there was limited enthusiasm for a truth commission it may in part be a result of fears that people have about delving into the past and a sense of pessimism about politics in general. What is also apparent is that, while in the main there is a large degree of agreement on what the aims of a truth commission should be (or indeed any past-focused process), there are also some important differences as to what should be the result of ‘getting to the truth’. This was most obvious in terms of whether or not the key aim of a truth commission should be that it would lead to the ‘punishment of people who had committed criminal offences’ (Table 2). While this was the first preferred aim of only 9% of respondents (compared, for example, to 30% who chose ‘to get at the truth’, 16% ‘to allow a line be drawn under the past’ and 13% ‘to allow communities

become reconciled’) this was more popular amongst unionists and the supporters of the DUP (20%) in particular. On the other hand, there was little support (3%) for the idea that a truth commission would ‘find out if institutions abused their power’ except amongst Sinn Fein voters (10%) though even here this was far less popular an option than ‘to get at the truth’ (30%) and ‘to draw a line under the past’ (18%). There were some notable differences too on the idea that a truth commission should ‘help communities become reconciled’ with this a far more favoured response for Alliance (22%) and SDLP (17%) voters than those of the UUP (13%), DUP (11%) and Sinn Fein (9%).

This pattern was generally repeated when the hopes and fears people had for a truth commission were explored. So, for example, while ‘promoting peace and reconciliation’ (61%), ‘uncovering the truth’ (50%) and to ‘get healing for victims’ (41%) were the most popular hopes, a significant number also hoped that it might ‘clean up any institutions shown to be corrupt’ (38%) and to get ‘criminal convictions’ (37%). However, nationalists (and particularly Sinn Fein supporters) were more inclined to support the former while, in the latter case, supporters of the DUP (51%) were significantly more likely to hope for criminal convictions than those of the UUP (38%), Sinn Fein (32%) and the SDLP (28%).

Table 2: Preferred aim of a truth commission by % of total and party political supporters

	%					
	All	UUP	DUP	Alliance	SDLP	SF
To get at the truth	30	34	29	26	25	30
To punish people who committed criminal offences	9	9	20	0	5	5
To get compensation for victims	3	2	2	4	1	1
To allow a line to be drawn under the past	16	17	8	27	23	18
To help communities get reconciled	13	13	11	22	17	9
As an opportunity for people to tell their stories	1	1	2	1	2	1
To find out if institutions abused their power	3	1	2	3	3	10
To get healing and closure	13	13	11	11	17	10
To get the story straight about the conflict	7	4	9	5	4	14
Other	1	1	1	0	0	1
Don't know	4	5	4	1	3	1
	100	100	100	100	100	100

In relation to fears, people were clearly concerned that a truth commission might re-ignite issues from the conflict by ‘causing more damage than good’ (45%), ‘creating greater tension’ (48%) or ‘start people fighting again’ (42%). However, the most widely expressed fear was that it would be ‘a waste of money’ (52%). In the latter case supporters of both the UUP (60%) and DUP (62%) were far more likely to express this fear than those of the SDLP (27%) and Sinn Fein (25%).

Powers and Structure

A sense of distrust and pessimism regarding virtually all locally based political groups and bodies was evident when people were asked who they might trust to run a truth commission. While it was not possible to ask people what combination of organisations they might wish to see in charge, roughly 90% of respondents stated that they would not trust any of groups mentioned (including, amongst others, the British and Irish Governments,

the Northern Ireland Assembly, victims groups, judges and the churches). The only bodies to elicit a significant degree of support were ‘international organisations, such as the UN’, whom 47% of people said they would trust to run a truth commission. Alliance (67%), SDLP (64%) and Sinn Fein (60%) supporters were significantly more likely than those of the UUP (45%) and DUP (36%) to view this internationalising of truth-telling in a positive light.

There was significant agreement that if a truth commission was created it should not have the power to grant amnesties for past wrongdoing to those giving testimony. Only 19% of people felt that amnesty powers (which have been a feature of other truth commissions) were a good idea while 60% were against it (including 1 in 3 who expressed this view strongly). There were significant differences in views according to religious affiliation. A third of Catholics (33%) supported the idea of amnesties (though only 8% strongly) with around half of Catholics (48%) against it. On the other hand a mere 10% of Protestants were for the

idea of amnesties, while 70% were against it (including 40% who said so strongly).

There were overwhelming majorities in favour of the idea that if a truth commission was set up it should be held in public (82%), travel around to talk to people (83%), have the power to compel people to appear (77%) and be chosen by ordinary people (76%). The importance of impartiality and independence was also emphasised by the fact that 87% thought that any truth commission should be ‘an outside body independent of anyone involved in the conflict’.

Other Ways to Deal with the Past

Truth commissions are not the only way in which a society emerging from conflict might attempt to come to terms with its past. There are a number of other options, many of which proved to be more popular than the idea of a truth commission (Table 3). Of these, ‘support for victims’ (88%) and ‘initiatives within communities’ (86%) were particularly favoured and enjoyed high levels of cross-community support. Also popular were a ‘story-telling’ process (69%), more police investigations (66%) and ‘public apologies’ (60%). Less favoured were ‘more compensation’ (51%) ‘memorials or centres of remembrance’ (43%) and ‘more public inquiries’ (42%). There tended to be a large degree of agreement on many of these options when looked at in terms of religious and party political affiliation, although there was a clear divergence of views on the question of ‘more public inquiries’. 56% of Catholics were in favour of further public inquiries, including 28% strongly so, 46% of those of no religion supported this option while only 32% of Protestants felt the same. 72% of Sinn Fein supporters thought more public inquiries were either very or fairly important for the future, while the figures for the other main political parties were SDLP (50%), Alliance (41%), DUP (35%) and UUP (26%). Attitudes to previous or ongoing public inquiries would seem to have an important impact here. A majority (59%) also favoured the setting up of a special unit within the police force to investigate all unsolved killings.

Table 3: Attitudes towards other ways than a truth commission to deal with the past

	%					
	Very important	Fairly important	Neither	Fairly unimportant	Very unimportant	Don't know
More public inquiries	19	23	17	18	19	4
Public apologies	32	28	18	11	8	3
More police investigations	32	34	15	10	5	4
Story-telling process	27	42	17	8	3	3
Memorials & centres of remembrance	13	30	24	19	10	2
Support for victims	43	45	6	2	2	2
More compensation	16	35	24	15	6	3
Community initiatives	39	47	7	4	2	2

Conclusion

The survey reveals a mixed picture on attitudes towards the idea of a truth commission for Northern Ireland. Around half of those asked thought such a process could be important for the future, although not necessarily seeing it as a key priority and having some doubts as to whether or not it could get to the truth. If a truth commission were to be set up there is a large group of people for whom its independence, impartiality and (for nationalists at least) an international dimension would be important for its success. However, a truth commission did

not enjoy as much support as a number of other possible ways of dealing with the past, most obviously in terms of providing support for victims and undertaking grassroots initiatives within communities.

References

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Key Points

- More respondents thought a truth commission was important or very important (50%) for the future of Northern Ireland than those who thought it was unimportant or very unimportant (28%).
- A majority (65%) thought that there were better ways to deal with the past and most (84%) did not think that you would 'necessarily get the truth' from a truth commission.
- There were large areas of agreement on what the aims of a truth commission should be but some significant differences depending on party affiliation.
- Most thought that a truth commission should be held in public, be an independent outside body and that ordinary people should have a say on who runs it.
- Unionists (particularly DUP voters) were far more likely than nationalists to want further police investigations and criminal convictions while fearing that a truth commission might allow the 'guilty to go free' or involve amnesties.
- The most popular alternative ways to deal with the past were 'support for victims' (88%), 'initiatives within communities' (85%) and a 'story-telling' process (69%).

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2004, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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